# Schools, Teaching and Values

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*This article briefly discusses values and values in education. It represents an attempt to move the debates past those common in the Fiji media that tend to simplistically point the blame at schools and teachers for perceived drops in standards of societal civility, politeness and respect. Rather than directly teaching a prescribed set of core values, the article examines the nature of values and change, and the underlying reasons for values difference in our communities. Teachers need to negotiate a diverse range of value positions in their day-to-day work with the children in their care. The article suggests a 'critical' approach to values education that aims to teach children how values arise in the community and how they circulate. This critical approach to values in schools, it is believed, is best suited to the climate of change and diversity, increasingly key markers of contemporary Pacific life.*

**Introduction**

Values can be described in many ways. Most simply, they are beliefs and understandings that individuals and groups hold to be important. They are often based on a world view or an ideological perspective. In many cases they can be linked to our motivations and interests in life. It is part of the human condition that we live according to our values. We acquire a set of values as we grow through childhood. They emerge as the product of the environment in which we live. There is probably an unlimited number of social factors that shape what we perceive to be important. There are the very early experiences we have as children in our families where we adopt unconsciously the values of our parents and other family members. As we grow and become conscious of the world around us, other influences begin to shape our values as well. Factors such as our gender, our social class, our location (meaning where we live), our exposure to the media and our cultural background all have profound influence on our emerging sets of values.

Schools are key shapers of values. They are not values-free places but the knowledges they transmit and the way they are organised reflect certain sets of values. Therefore, teachers need to engage with a sociology of education, perhaps, as a first point of contact with values and values education. Schools promote certain values either intentionally through direct teaching and learning or unintentionally through particular curricula emphases and administrative styles. Some examples might include: control, order, achievement, neatness, a strong work ethic and obedience. It is sometimes said that when we acquire values in unintentional ways then values are 'caught'. When we acquire values through intentional or explicit teaching, at school or at home, then values are 'taught'.

**Values are multiple and contested**

Schools are sites where a multitude of values come together on a daily basis. Schools often act as social centres of small communities but also play a similar role in larger urban centres. School staff often have to work very hard to achieve cohesion, probably even harder in larger communities than in small. As the world tends to shrink due to the spread of communications technologies and mobility of people, so too does the spread of values increase. The small conservative village community in the Pacific is becoming increasingly drawn into the mix of values and beliefs that occurs outside it.

Schools work smoothly when communities and schools work together and arrive at sets of mutually agreed core values. Even so, the multiple sets of values still exist to a greater or lesser degree and the school has to work hard to accommodate

the differences. There are many different views on the teaching of core values. These teaching perspectives themselves are laden with values.

All schools to some degree attempt to reach a form of consensus about shared and common values. Evidence of this can be seen in school mottoes, uniforms, pledges, school songs and so on. Some schools work in concert with their communities and devise a list of core values, or a shared vision, which is then written into school mission statements and policy. These statements are contestable and do not always represent everybody's views. Often they are very general and open to interpretation. Teachers need to critically analyse such policy statements and their implementation, especially if it is considered that schooling should have a strong social justice agenda. APNIEVE, a UNESCO Values Education Group in the Asia/Pacific region, is one such group that has devised a set of possible core values to help schools in the region devise values education programmes (APNIEVE 2002). These values include: health and harmony with nature; truth and wisdom; love and compassion; creativity and appreciation of nature; peace and justice; sustainable human development; national unity and solidarity; and global spirituality.

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Schools and their communities are undergoing great change. The change is greatest in urban centres around the region. In the more rural parts of the region the change is not as noticeable but is nevertheless happening. With these changes comes a greater diversity of values held by community members. John Urry (2000, 2002) notes that change occurs in two ways. The first is when people become increasingly mobile and physically move in and out of geographical areas for work and family reasons. The second occurs as a result of advances in communications and information technology. In this case, values become mobile and move around, even when people do not move. Of course, not all people are mobile or have access to information technology to the same degree. Therefore, the spread of information and values flow is often very uneven across communities. This adds to the complexities of communities and the work of teachers in relation to teaching values.

**Values and schooling**

Schooling and knowledge are themselves not value-free but heavily laden with the values of those who are involved in decision-making. Schooling, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally, reinforces some groups' values over the values of others. The term 'the hidden curriculum' (Seddon 1993) is sometimes used to refer to those unintended effects of schooling on children. Sometimes the values of each of these groups are not made clear but are nevertheless real and powerful shapers of children's lives. Teachers need to become astute observers of the children in their care and become expert at reading the context in which their school is set.

The novels of Sia Figiel (1996, 1999), the Samoan writer, provide an interesting account of values conflicts in Pacific society generally and sometimes more specifically through schooling. In one such example she depicts a Samoan teacher and an American Peace Corp volunteer teacher, both with different teaching styles. The children react differently to both teachers and in unplanned ways arrive at new understandings about themselves as individuals. These new understandings of identity occur because of the differences between the two teachers. Their new understandings also emerge in ways that neither of the teachers could have planned for. Again, it takes a very insightful teacher to appreciate that the ways in which teachers go about their work as teachers can have far-reaching effects on the children in their care. In Figiel's novel the children reach quite positive and life-enhancing insights about themselves but this does not always happen. Sometimes the influences can be harmful.

As we have said, schools are complex organisations where many factors influence their work and at times compete with each other for the attention of teachers and children. It is worth our while as reflective teachers to identify the different influences on the children in our care. Major groups that influence children include parents, influential local community members, teachers, curriculum writers, religious groups, the government and the media in its many forms to name but some. Bronfenbrenner's (in Papalia *et al* 1998:8) *ecological* model of child development, as opposed to perhaps the more popular cognitive models (for example, that of Piaget) of our teacher training, is useful here in helping us appreciate the web-like breadth of influences that impact on a child.

An important set of ideas that teachers need to reflect on is the nature of these influences. Are our Pacific societies and all the institutions, groups and individuals, including schooling, basically working in harmony towards the common good of all and social cohesion? Alternatively, are our societies and their different components, including schooling, operating in a constant state of tension, with different sets of values, beliefs and ideals, competing together for resources and institutional power? Many would strongly suggest that all societies, including Pacific ones, are better described in terms of the second description above. In sociological terms this is known broadly as 'conflict' theory. If 'conflict' theory is the better explanation of what we see going on around us then we as teachers need to develop a 'critical' approach to values education as we seek to work with and for the children and families in our local communities.

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Given the above comments regarding 'conflict' and being 'critical', it is appropriate to try and identify those groups and individuals in the community that for one reason or another have not been given an opportunity to speak. Sometimes there may be valid reasons for people's voices being heard or not heard. 'Culture' in many Pacific countries is often used to justify participation or non-participation of certain groups in community affairs, including education. Teachers need to take care with these particular issues and be aware that culture-type arguments can both promote and hinder access to resources and equity. Sometimes, however, there are injustices behind the silence which need to be addressed. Quite often these groups consist of the students themselves, some parents, the poor, those who lack material capital and cultural capital, in some cases women, the disabled and so on. Teachers need to be astute observers and intelligent interpreters of their school and community contexts.

The fact that children bring to school each day their "virtual school bags" (Thomson 2003) complicates things even more. Pat Thompson argues these bags are "full of things that they have already learned at home, from friends and the wider world". Children bring in each day a little bit from last night's video, a little bit from their grandmother, a little bit from their uncle just returned from overseas, a little bit from their father, a little bit from a whole range of sources. In addition, every child in the class has something different in their "virtual school bags".

Another way of looking at this is by considering the similar concept of "cultural capital" (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990). This refers to the great range of experiences and understandings that children absorb from their home, family environments and other sources. These experiences and understandings are accumulated in much the same way financial capital is accrued. By the time a child is old enough to go to school, the levels of cultural capital are quite high. Much educational research (Connell 1985, 1993) has shown that schools often promote a particular type of cultural capital. Some children's experiences and understandings will be

affirmed at school, whereas for other children the school environment will seem alien and strange. The same educational research has demonstrated that the children whose cultural capital matches that of the school will achieve higher learning outcomes than those children whose experiences and understandings are not affirmed. Some examples of the 'right' cultural capital, that which the school values, might be English language skills, or books in the home, a supportive family, neatness and punctuality.

In contemplating these notions of 'hidden curriculum', 'virtual school bags' and 'cultural capital' teachers' work takes on a high degree of complexity. Teachers need to work hard to seek ways of addressing inequality and difference, first of all in their own classrooms and teaching and then at other levels, possibly collectively with colleagues in a community, nationally through associations or even politically. Teachers need to adopt a social justice agenda and seek strategies for including equity in their own personal and professional framework for values education.

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**Teachers and negotiation**

The difficulties for teachers in negotiating the contestations can be great. How teachers do this is a mark of their professionalism. In their planning for values education teachers need to think deeply and critically about the complex contexts in which they work. Often the debates about values in society and perceived falling standards of civility are blamed on teachers and schools: hence the need for a more direct approach to teaching values along the lines of 'character education'. Teachers need to be cautious in their response to these sorts of pressures. Teachers need to make their own professional judgments based on an intimate social knowledge of their schools, communities and national contexts. They need to work at all times responsively with their communities and within systems guidelines, that is, policy documents and syllabus statements. Whether we feel comfortable with the changes that are taking place around us or not in terms of technological change, mobilities of people and values, teachers need to *respond* pro-actively to changes and the diversity of values in circulation in schools and their communities.

Teachers need to adopt a socially critical approach to the teaching of values in their classrooms and schools. This means that children do not approach values in isolation; they examine something of the underlying reasons why certain values are considered beneficial or harmful, and what the consequences are for themselves and others through their adoption or rejection. In such an approach, consent is still given to the notion of core values but a greater sensitivity is given to those groups or individuals who might not benefit from the inflation of some values positions over others.

Scapp (2003) usefully suggests approaching values education from what he terms an "extra-moral sense". By this he means making strong links between the variety of values positions that circulate locally, nationally and globally and a sense of justice. Put in a simple way, particular value positions become either valid or non-valid for reasons of 'fairness' for those involved. Value positions are not adopted or rejected necessarily on the basis of tradition, culture (in the broad sense of 'the way we always do things' as well as in the narrower sense of Pacific identity) or, perhaps at worst, the maintenance of positions of power. These broadly-defined approaches resist what Ron Scapp (2003) calls following "a herd-like style obligatory for all". It is suggested that a much more effective approach, where our Pacific lives are marked by complex multiplicity in the ways described above, is the in-depth examination by children of why we behave the way we do and the consequences of that behaviour. Underlying this

classroom exploration of values is a strong guiding sense of social justice and what is fair. Children use a social justice lens through which they view and re-view all value positions, including the most widely cherished ones.

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